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The Strategic Importance of Leaving Afghanistan

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Sixty years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower articulated his concern about the ability of his presidential successors to control the military. Several weeks before his Farewell

Address, he gathered his senior advisers in the Oval Office of the White House and mused: "God help this country when someone sits in this chair who doesn't know the military as well as I do." By and large, the successors to Eisenhower have lacked military experience; they have been deferential to the military and have recklessly used military force to bolster their credentials. This has been a key factor in the expanded power of the military establishment over foreign policy, national security policy, and the intelligence community.

President Joe Biden appears to be the first president since Eisenhower who actually knows the military. A decade ago, then-Vice President Biden warned President Barack Obama that he was being rolled by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and such generals and "proconsels" as David Petraeus, Stanley McChrystal, and Kurt Eikenberry, who were outrageously lobbying on Capital Hill for a greater force presence in Afghanistan while Obama was leaning toward a reduced presence. Biden argued privately that "wars were self-perpetuating when generals called the shots," and that the Pentagon's demands for a "conditions-based withdrawal" had created an endless war. Gates's malicious criticism of Biden over the years has been a response to the vice president's prescient advice.

The United States has paid an enormous price in blood and treasure for being wrong about Afghanistan, where we had an immediate goal (removing al Qaeda), but no strategic concerns or vital interests in Afghanistan per se. The same could be said for our disastrous wars in Vietnam and Iraq, where official lies were used to justify the use of force. The example of Afghanistan is particularly onerous because the United States, in the wake of 9/11, achieved its mission in less than one hundred days in 2001 with fewer than 500 special forces and CIA operatives. This diminutive force and the ethnic tribes in the north managed to drive both the Taliban and al Qaeda from the country. Soon after, the Taliban offered to negotiate its return to Kabul, but the Bush administration was convinced it could succeed where Alexander the Great; Genghis Khan; Tamerlane; Queen Victoria; and Leonid Brezhnev couldn't. All failed in the "graveyard of empires."

Meanwhile, the carping and complaining about Biden's decisive decision have begun from the usual sources, led by the *Washington Post*. The lead editorial in the *Post* on April 14 accused Biden of taking the "easy way out of Afghanistan," and predicted that the return of terrorist bases to Afghanistan "could force a renewed U.S. intervention." The *Post's* leading national security columnist, David Ignatius, warned that a "civil war may quickly erupt, and the Kabul government may collapse." But Afghanistan has never had an effective national government in its history, and the country has been in a civil and

uncivil war for the past fifty years—since King Mohammed Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973. Ignatius, like too many of today's pundits, raises the old trope regarding Biden as a "genial gaffer, pliable in the way of a career politician."

The *Post* editorial and the Ignatius column were part and parcel of that paper's effort to support the phony justifications for continuing the longest war in U.S. history. The *Post* supported every illusional and delusional justification for the war as uttered by secretaries of state such as Hillary Clinton and secretaries of defense such as Gates. We were told that the United States was in Afghanistan to transform the country into a stable democratic ally; weaken the Taliban; fight corruption; and end the drug trade. The notion that Afghanistan could become a Jeffersonian democracy was of course risible. Meanwhile U.S. occupation and U.S. dollars became recruitment tools for the Taliban and added fuel to the fire of Afghan corruption, respectively.

Biden's decision in his first hundred days to leave Afghanistan was out of Harry S. Truman's playbook; it was gutsy and it ignored the Pentagon. Biden said the withdrawal decision was not difficult because it was "absolutely clear" that it was time to bring the war to an end. Biden moved quickly and decisively to reverse the wrongful decisions of his three immediate predecessors. We can only hope that the withdrawal decision is the first of several that will reduce the power of the Pentagon and the reliance on the use of force that have compromised U.S. policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union thirty years ago.

The exaggeration of threats to the United States has been the critical component over the years in the militarization of our national security policy. Such exaggerations of the Soviet threat fostered the huge strategic buildup during the Cold War; the unneeded peacetime buildup by the Reagan administration; and the massive increases in defense spending during the Bush II administration. The exaggeration of the threat of international terrorism has produced two decades of costly warfare. Now, we are in the process of exaggerating the threat of China to U.S. national interests. We are about to learn if Joe Biden can challenge the drumbeat from the policy and pundit communities,which seem to believe that the answer to the China problem can only be found in the Pentagon.

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